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## 'That's scripture, ain't it?' - Evangelicals and Reading the Bible in the midst of Human Cultures

Douglas Jacobsen

Messiah College, [djacobse@messiah.edu](mailto:djacobse@messiah.edu)

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One College Avenue | Mechanicsburg PA 17055

**"That's scripture, ain't it?"-Evangelicals and  
Reading the Bible in the Midst of Human Cultures**

**Douglas Jacobsen**

**Messiah College, Fall 1994**

**(An "Integration of Faith and Learning Paper" submitted as part of the  
documentation required for promotion to the position of full professor.)**

Much of my research and writing during the last five years has been dedicated to understanding how different more or less evangelical religious groups in America have tried to read the Bible in the light of their own historical experience and contemporary social location. In particular, I have examined the hermeneutics of what I call "mainstream" (or "custodial") evangelicalism, pentecostalism, anabaptism, and the Black Church. For the most part, my goal has been "merely" to understand what has been going on hermeneutically in each of these rather different communities during the twentieth century. To that end, I have read (what has come to seem like) countless academic treatises on biblical interpretation written by members of these communities and I have perused more popular churchly books and periodicals than I ever wanted to know existed.

Rather than concentrating on the specific findings that have emerged from all this research, however, I would like to shift gears in this paper and discuss what I think are some of the most important cross-communal issues that have come to light regarding broadly evangelical ways of reading the Bible. This text is also a first draft of what may become a "theological postscript" to the hermeneutics book I am writing. The writing style here is somewhat less academic than will be used in the main body of that text. The more popular and personally involved style adopted for this potential "postscript" is intentional.

My goal is to state in explicit terms some of the implicit assumptions regarding the integration of faith and learning that

have shaped my scholarly work on hermeneutics and to articulate the most important convictions I have developed as a result of my research. I will begin with a definition of what I mean by "broad evangelicalism;" then I will discuss briefly a few crucial aspects of evangelical hermeneutical theory and practice; finally, I will provide one articulation of the kind of conversational hermeneutical framework that I think ought to underlie all truthful biblical hermeneutical activity (evangelical or other) in the (post)modern era.

#### I. Defining Broad Evangelicalism:

The notion of calling any group or person "evangelical" has come to be more and more fraught with ambiguity during the last several decades. Different people use this word in different ways and for different purposes. At the very least, three distinct uses of the word need to be recognized. First, some people use the term "evangelical" as if it was basically synonymous with being Protestantly "conservative" or, perhaps more accurately, with being Protestantly "anti-liberal." Used in this sense, the word "evangelical" becomes a partisan nickname that functionally divides Protestant Christianity in two. The worldview ensconced in this use of the term looks something like this: We evangelicals represent the purest and best form of Protestant faith and you "liberals" (i.e., a short hand label for all other kinds of Protestants awkwardly clumped together) must

therefore be either heretics or defective Protestants. (Most evangelicals of this definitional ilk have thought of Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox Christians as being basically heretical or defective in faith as well.) While this use of the term "evangelical" is quite common in popular American discourse, such a narrow and contentious definition is clearly not the idea I have in mind when I use the phrase "broad evangelicalism."

A second use of the term "evangelical" refers to all those people associated in some way or another with the institutional framework of what can be called American subcultural inter-denominational evangelicalism. In this sense of the term, an evangelical is someone who belongs to the National Association of Evangelicals (or an NAE member church), or who subscribes to Christianity Today, or who dreams of sending his or her kids to Wheaton College. This is perhaps the most common public use of the term "evangelical" and the institutional objectivity of the concept has some very real sociological merits. (In fact, this sociologically defined group of evangelicals basically constitutes one of the evangelical communities I have examined. In my study I use the adjectives "mainstream" and "custodial" to identify this particular group of evangelicals.) As with the first use of the term, however, this notion of evangelicalism tends to draw more distinct boundaries among evangelically-oriented Christians than seem either tenable or necessary. This tendency becomes particularly visible when some of these kinds of evangelicals ask questions like whether Southern Baptists, or

Mennonites, or black pentecostals are really evangelical at all?

A third definition of evangelicalism is both more inclusive than the two mentioned thus far and fuzzier at the edges. Evangelicalism in this sense is conceived of either as residing in one general "zone" of Christian piety (rather than in a neatly fenced off field) or as existing in the form of a certain "family resemblance" which is recognizable though not easily describable. What roughly marks off this zone or family resemblance from other Christian zones or families is a list of relative emphases. For example, evangelicalism is generally characterized by a certain depth of bibliocentrism in faith, a degree of caution in reformulating the inherited theological vocabulary of historic orthodoxy, a heightened respect for and encouragement of personal religious devotion, and a focused concern to "share" one's Christian faith with others. These kinds of commitments comprise the religious disposition that I call "broad evangelicalism" and it is this broad definition of evangelicalism that informed my choice of groups to investigate.

## II. Theory and Practice in Evangelical Hermeneutics:

If one is to engage in honest hermeneutics it is necessary to pay attention both to theory and practice. Going a step further, honest hermeneutics really demands that theory and practice be brought into contact with each other. This is no easy task. For example, it is not as if we can just get our

theory "right" and then make sure our practice follows that "right" theory. When we look at both our theory and practice we may, in fact, find that our practice has more of a ring of truth to it than what we may have assumed was our more "correct" theoretical ideal. On the other hand, it may be that our practice really is faulty and needs to be corrected in light of our hermeneutical theory. More likely still, we may discover that our hermeneutical theories and practices are both defective. Whatever the case, no person's biblical hermeneutics can be called honest or truthful if practice and stated theory diverge. If one cannot live with one's theory it needs to be modified or discarded, and if one cannot give any coherent theoretical account of one's practices they can hardly be seen as anything more than idiosyncratic. My initial decision to engage in this area of research and writing was rooted in this concern to bring evangelical hermeneutical theory and practice closer together. (See, for example, my recent article in Christian Scholar's Review, September 1993, on "The Calvinist-Arminian Dialectic in Evangelical Hermeneutics.")

One of the most basic assumptions common to broad evangelicalism is that one really doesn't need to "interpret" the Bible at all in order to understand it. All you need to do is read the book with an open mind. I call this the "no hermeneutic" hermeneutic of popular evangelicalism. R. A. Torrey once put it this way: "The Bible is one of the easiest books in the world to understand if men really wish to understand it and

to find out what it actually teaches, and do not wish to read into it their own notions and speculations."<sup>1</sup>

Throughout most of the twentieth century most American evangelicals have shared this basic theoretical understanding of the Bible. (Though in recent years--and in some regions of evangelicalism for more than two decades or more--an awareness of the need for real interpretation in the task of understanding the biblical text has been growing.) This has not meant that most evangelicals have thought that just anyone can flippantly pick up the Bible and understand what it is saying. Evangelicals assume that true understanding of the Bible takes study. But, the broad evangelical assumption has been that if you are willing to put in the time, and if you are not purposefully trying to read your own views into the Bible, the meaning of the Bible will be clear to you.

While this is great theory, it runs into some trouble when we try to connect it with evangelical practice. I suppose the most obvious problem for the "no hermeneutic" evangelical hermeneutical theory is that in practice different evangelicals reading the Bible with equally open minds have come to different conclusions about what the Bible means. One would assume that this shouldn't happen. The Bible should say the same things to different people. The issue of biblical hermeneutical diversity is, however, too large a problem to hang around only evangelical

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<sup>1</sup>Reuben A. Torrey, The Christ of the Bible (New York: George H. Doran Co., 1924), p. 14.

necks. After all, the diversity of meanings that different Christians have derived from the Bible has been an enduring catholic Christian problem and it remains so today on a worldwide Christian basis. So, let's set aside the issue of diversity for the time being and look at something else. The real problem with evangelicalism's "no hermeneutic" hermeneutic is that evangelicals simply don't live that way--they constantly "import" other ideas and implicit hermeneutical strategies into their reading of the Bible. They do bring interpretive frameworks to the biblical text, but they often seem unwilling or unable to admit that fact.

The most entertaining portrayal of this tendency I have ever run across is found in John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath. At one point, just as the truck is loaded and the Joad family is ready to take off for California, the following dialogue takes place between "Ma" Joad (who is doing a final washing of her younger children's clothes) and her grown son Tom.

Tom said, "Don't roust your faith bird-high an' you won't do no crawlin' with the worms."

"I know that's right. That's Scripture, ain't it?"

"I guess so," said Tom. "I never could keep Scripture straight sence I read a book name' The Winning of Barbara Worth."

Ma chuckled lightly and scrounged the clothes in and out of the bucket. And she wrung out overalls and shirts, and the muscles of her forearms corded out. "Your Pa's pa, he quoted Scripture all the time. He got it all roiled up, too. It was the Dr. Miles' Almanac he got mixed up. Used to read ever' word in that almanac out loud--letters from folks that couldn't sleep or had lame backs. An' later he'd

give them people for a lesson, an' he'd say, 'That's a par'ble from Scripture.' Your Pa an' Uncle John troubled 'im some about it when they'd laugh."<sup>2</sup>

While this Joad family conversation is fiction, evangelicals throughout the twentieth century (and I'm sure years before) have also gotten their interpretations of the Bible "all roiled" up with other things they have read or heard. What is worse is the fact that most evangelicals have seemed oblivious to the fact that their interpretations have been "roiled up" with anything at all. Perhaps there just haven't been enough evangelical folks around like "Pa and Uncle John" who could laugh once in a while at what was going on. But, at times, a little holy hermeneutical laughter could have helped.

Let me provide just one example--admittedly an extreme example--that deserves a little constructive laughter. It comes from the "search question" curriculum of Prairie Bible Institute located in Three Hills, Alberta. The introduction to the course on the study of the Bible reads as follows:

The 'Study Guide Method' of Bible teaching is absolutely unique, both in its character and its results. . . . Bible truth when mediumized to the student through prepared outlines, books, or lectures can never grip the heart as the firsthand revelation of the Book itself. By 'Bible Teaching' is meant the opening up of the whole revelation of the Book of God as an entirety and as it comes to us. These Search Questions are especially selected and are designed to enable the student to sound the depths of God's Word as an organic body of revelation. The teacher keeps from between the student and the subject and pushes the student by personal first-hand research, but under careful guidance,

<sup>2</sup>John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath (New York: Viking Press, 1939), chapter ten.

into rich original findings. The result is that the Bible is not mediumized to the student, but the student has his own revelation and his own message of the truth.

By the second page of questions in this study book, however, these supposedly neutral "Search Questions" that were designed to avoid all "mediumizing" of the Bible's message to the student are beginning to read as follows:

From [Gen.] 2:8-14 taken in connection with Gen. 26:3, 4; Ex. 23:31; Num. 34:3; Deut. 11:24; and Ezek. 47:18, does it seem probable that Eden included a vast territory now represented by the great quadrangular Arabian peninsula; and that that part of the earth was reserved by Christ for His own special earthly estate, to occupy it with Adam first in the part called the 'garden,' and to occupy it ultimately in its full extent with his chosen people of Israel? See Ex. 15:17; Deut. 32:8, 9; Psa. 87:1, 2; Num. 35:34.<sup>3</sup>

Clearly there is something more going on here than just reading the Bible with an open mind. If one wanted to be sarcastic, one might even say that a whole host of "mediumizing" seems to have somehow gotten "all roiled up" in this supposedly neutral "search question."

Not all evangelicals, of course, have been as determinedly self-blinded to the larger context of interpretation as the writer of the PBI Search Question curriculum. In particular, numerous evangelicals have admitted the role that tradition and the formulations of historic orthodoxy have played in their reading of the Bible. Clark Pinnock has been, perhaps, more blunt in this regard than most:

To be honest about this I would have to grant that the systematic framework we use is not ordinarily derived from a

<sup>3</sup>Search Questions: First and Second Years (Three Hill, Alberta: Prairie Bible Institute, 1950), p. 7.

purely inductive examination of the Bible--it is given to us by the Christian tradition we respect. We read the Bible as Baptists, or Anglicans, or Catholics, or Lutherans, and this fact influences what we read. It forcibly reminds us that the work of interpretation is not done by single individuals or even a single generation."<sup>4</sup>

Pinnock is clearly correct in what he says here, but my research in the hermeneutics of different evangelical groups indicates that we need to go considerably further in recognizing and admitting what goes into our readings of the Bible. It is not just that we are Baptists or Anglicans. We are also urbanites or suburbanites or rural folk from the Northeast or the Midwest or the South or the West. We are blue collar workers or professionals, men or women, black or white. We are Republicans or Democrats, or politically uninformed and uninvolved. We are all people with distinctive ideas and ideals already roiled up inside ourselves and all of that mix gets plugged into our different readings of the Bible in some way or another whether we want it to or not. It's not just that because of sin we each "see through a glass darkly"--though that sometimes may be the case. It's that we each see the Bible seemingly clearly, but differently, based on where God has placed us in this world.

If evangelicals want to take the Bible seriously as an authoritative text for Christian faith and practice, and if we want to be honest hermeneuts, we will need to acknowledge this sloppy hermeneutical diversity and take it explicitly into

<sup>4</sup>Clark H. Pinnock, "How I Use the Bible in Doing Theology," in Robert K. Johnston, ed., The Use of the Bible in Theology: Evangelical Options (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), p. 28.



account in our theoretical musings about how the Bible is to be understood. The only alternatives to explicitly dealing with this hermeneutical diversity seem to be either (1) to establish a formal hermeneutical magisterium within the evangelical world that will authoritatively define what the Bible says for all believers (the Catholic model and one that seems incompatible with other evangelical values); or (2) to accept the fact that one is willing functionally to raise one's own reading of the biblical text (or one's own groups' reading of the text) to a status higher than the actual text of the Bible itself (an option that also seems decidedly not evangelical).

### III. Toward a Framework of More Honest Evangelical Hermeneutics:

While I cannot pretend to tell all evangelicals how they should read the Bible, I would like to propose here a set of five precepts that I think ought to be acknowledged by all evangelical (and for that matter non-evangelical) biblical hermeneuts. These five precepts cannot by any means masquerade as a complete system of hermeneutics. Rather they represent an additional set of concerns that hopefully will help evangelicals, in the company of all other Christians of good will, to be both more honest in their hermeneutical endeavors and more faithful in their listening to and following of the words of life found in the Bible.

#### 1. Admit that hermeneutically we all "start in the middle:"

While it is a pleasant myth to think that we can approach the Bible from a neutral stance and simply "discover" truth in its pages, all of us, in point of fact, approach the Bible from particular starting points. What really happens when we read the Bible (or any other text) is that we bring the world that exists within us into some kind of creative contact with the words of the text. When we read the Bible we try to make sense of the text basically by building bridges between what the text says and what we already believe to be true. In other words, we don't begin either "at the beginning" or from a "neutral stance." When we seek to understand the Bible we invariably begin in the middle of a welter of inherited predispositions, presuppositions, and preunderstandings. Calvin Schrag puts it this way:

Our starting points seem to borrow heavily from the language and the corpus of literature in the tradition in which we stand, as well as from involvement and reflection upon the endless spate of personal and social experience. We thus rather quickly learn the truth that we never stand at the beginning but are always somehow already begun, held within a web of delivered discourse, social practices, professional requirements, and the daily decisions of everyday life. It is thus that we do well to recognize the ineradicable situationality of our starting points and avoid the all too facile transformation of them into foundational principles.<sup>5</sup>

To admit the fact that we read the Bible "situationally" does not necessarily undercut the importance or authority of the Bible as a guide to Christian faith and practice. We can still try very hard to obey the Bible as much as we think we understand

<sup>5</sup>Calvin O. Schrag, Communicative Praxis and the Space of Subjectivity (Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 4.

it. What such an admission does effect, however, is a change in attitude regarding the way we relate to others who are also trying to follow the scriptures and who disagree with us. If we recognize and admit our own situationality, our first inclination should be to try to learn from those who disagree with us--to borrow their eyes and read the text from their situationality. It should not be to judge those who disagree with us immediately as either stupid or heretical. Which brings us to precept number two.

2. Dialogue with those with whom you disagree: Because we are all specifically, situationally located, we all need to expand the realm of what we metaphorically can "see" in the text. We do this through dialogue with others. The foundation of this precept is what Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin called the "law of placement." Michael Holquist explains this Bakhtinian law and its ramifications as follows:

[Bakhtin] begins with a simple datum from experience; not an observer looking at trains, but an observer looking at another observer. You can see things behind my back that I cannot see, and I can see things behind your back that are denied to your vision. We are both doing essentially the same thing, but from different places: although we are in the same event, that event is different for each of us. Our places are different not only because our bodies occupy different positions in exterior physical space, but also because we regard the world and each other from different centers in cognitive time/space. . . .

The fact that I cannot see such things [i.e., my own forehead] does not mean that they do not exist; we are arranged that I simply cannot see them. But it is equally the case that I see things that you are unable to see, such as your forehead, and the wall behind your back. In addition to the things we see jointly, there are aspects of

our situation each of us can see only on our own, i.e. only from the unique place each of us occupies in the situation.

The aspect of the situation that you see, but that I do not, is what Bakhtin call your "surplus of seeing"; those things that I see but that you cannot constitute my "surplus of seeing." By adding the surplus that has been "given" to you to the surplus that has been "given" to me I can build up an image that includes the whole of me and the room, including those things I cannot physically see: in other words, I am able to "conceive" or construct a whole out of the different situations we are in together.<sup>6</sup>

What Bakhtin is saying is that if we want to understand the world, or a text, or life in its fullest dimensions we must rely on the (in)sight of others. No one of us sees the whole, but each of us, as we express honestly what we do see, can enrich the mix of visions that is available for each of us as we try to conceive or construct our understanding of the whole. For Bakhtin there is no end to this conversational process in human history. He writes:

There is neither a first nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context (it extends into the boundless past and the boundless future). Even past meanings, that is those born in the dialogue of past centuries, can never be stable (finalized, ended once and for all)--they will always change (be renewed) in the process of subsequent, future development of the dialogue. At any moment in the development of the dialogue there are immense, boundless masses of forgotten contextual meanings, but at certain moments of the dialogue's subsequent development along the way they are recalled and invigorated in renewed form (in a new context).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Michael Holquist, Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 21, 36-7.

<sup>7</sup>M. M. Bakhtin, Speech Genres and Other Late Essays, translated by Vern W. McGee and edited by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986), p. 170.

While the open-endedness of Bakhtin's vision of the interpretive process might appear either frighteningly chaotic or energetically freeing to different people, its basic assumptions should come as no great surprise to evangelical Christians--especially those of a more Arminian or Wesleyan disposition. The Apostle Paul long ago wrote that Christians would "grow up in every way in Christ" only by "speaking the truth in love" to each other. Jacob Arminius, writing in 1606 said that each of us should:

place ourselves in the circumstances of an adversary, and let him in return assume the character which we sustain; since it is as possible for us, as it is of him, to hold wrong principles. When we have made this experiment, we may be brought to think, that the very person whom we had previously thought to be in error, and whose mistakes in our eyes had a destructive tendency, may perhaps have been given to us by God, that out of his mouth we may learn the truth which has hitherto been unknown to us.<sup>8</sup>

3. Interpose hermeneutical struggle with hermeneutical repose: Any Arminian-Bakhtinian call to hermeneutical dialogue like that just presented can, of course, become stultifying in its incessant demand to hear yet one more voice, and then another, and then another, ad infinitum. The endlessness of the whole thing seems to make any starting along that pluralistic and dialogic route almost pointless. No human being could ever complete Bakhtin's ever enlarging circle of dialogue, so why even begin? Why? Because we already have begun. That was Calvin

<sup>8</sup>James Arminius, "On Reconciling Religious Dissensions among Christians," in The Works of James Arminius, vol.1, translated by James Nichols (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1986), p. 472.

Schrag's point. We are already en route, we are already in the middle of things, we are already on the dialogic road. The question therefore is not whether or not we should follow this path, but how we should conduct ourselves on it.

Wayne C. Booth provides some practical advice along these lines. In Critical Understanding, where he sketches out his own pluralistic and dialogic understanding of literary criticism, Booth states that: "it is probably true that no one can maintain [this] kind of disinterested inquiry for long. It is also true that trying to hear too many voices at once can silence me. All critical vitality depends on accepting limitations, and it is as impossible to speak for all voices as it is to reduce them all to one." He goes on to admit that, "It is thus writ in heaven that any critic who has not given up will remain to some degree confused." So, how should we act in this state of greater or lesser confusion? Booth suggests an oceanic metaphor as a model. Rather than swimming constantly against the waves, he says that (if we allow ourselves to find them) we will come upon islands on which to rest for a while before plunging back into the waters of pluralistic critical inquiry. He writes:

There is a great difference between the exhausted swimmer who is convinced that the patternless waves he struggles through extend in all directions without limit, and the one who says to himself, "There are islands. Swim a bit further, and you will certainly find another one, perhaps even more hospitable than the last one you rested on."

<sup>9</sup>Wayne C. Booth, Critical Understanding: The Powers and Limits of Pluralism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), pp. 339-40.

While never explicitly (or implicitly) citing Christian theology in this passage, Booth's remarks echo a long tradition in Christian theology that has emphasized the need to "wait" on God. In the modern era this has been articulated in Germany by Christoph Blumhardt and Karl Barth, in France by Jacques Ellul, and in America by people like Vernard Eller (a Church of the Brethren theologian). The central notion here is that ultimately we are not in charge of either the universe or the course of human history. We are here to do the work assigned to us as a result of the creation and as part of God's special calling to us, but ultimately the success or failure of our endeavors are beyond our control. The success of our work "rests" with God.

If this is true of life and faith in general it must also apply to the work of hermeneutics. Ultimately the word of God we seek to hear honestly and humbly in and through the biblical text exists beneath us in God's loving presence as much as it exists beyond our grasp in the endless dialogue of Christian faith. Because this is the case we can rest, at times, in our hermeneutical endeavors. We can (and must) take time out from trying to understand the Bible in order to do what the Bible (as best as we can grasp it) calls us to do. We must take time to "live" within the worlds of meaning and truth we derive from the biblical text just as we spend other time striving to refine and correct our understanding. So, a certain sabbatical rhythm is interjected into the hermeneutical endeavor. We labor and we rest. The life of the hermeneut necessarily and rightly

alternates (as does all of the Christian life) between work and waiting upon the Lord. Nicholas Wolterstorff described this pattern of life as follows:

I think it is inescapable that the fundamental meaning of this component of rest in the rhythmic alternation of six-plus-one in daily existence is that human life is meant to include something more than labor . . . It is meant to include delight in the works of God and man. . . . The institution of the day of rest as a holy day was not the invitation to escape from history for a while into some realm of immutable perfection, but the invitation to "celebrate what is given and, more specifically, to take

time to highlight the ordinary as something very worthwhile.<sup>10</sup>

#### 4. Respect both ultimate Truth and penultimate truths:

There is a tendency among many evangelical hermeneuts (and especially theologians) to try to focus on the ultimate Truth of scripture to the neglect of many penultimate truths that can (and need to) be derived from the pages of the Bible. Truth (capital "T") in this context stands as a symbol of the trans-cultural or hyper-cultural affirmations of the Bible; truth (little "t") stands for the more culturally-embedded rules of life and patterns of thought that direct our daily existence as Christians. In terms of biblical hermeneutics, I think we simply must affirm both the Truth of scriptures (which numerous scholars have tried to state in the dis-cultured and dis-located language of systematic theology) and the truths of scripture which we can evoke from the Bible only through our peculiarly encultured and particularly located readings of the biblical text.

This balancing act is, of course, not easy to do. In fact, it often seems difficult even to describe the kind of juggling act that is needed. Dietrich Bonhoeffer is one who has tried to do this, and the somewhat redundant and convoluted language of the following passage from his Ethics gives some indication of

<sup>10</sup>Nicholas Wolterstorff, Until Justice and Peace Embrace (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 153.

just how hard he found it to put the proper balance between the ultimate and the penultimate into words:

For the sake of the ultimate the penultimate must be preserved. Any arbitrary destruction of the penultimate will do serious injury to the ultimate. If, for example, a human life is deprived of the conditions which are proper to it, then the justification of such a life by grace and faith, if it is not rendered impossible, is at least seriously impeded. . . it is necessary to see to it that the penultimate, too, is provided with the preaching of the ultimate word of God . . . lest the destruction of the penultimate should prove a hindrance to the ultimate. . . Christian life is the dawning of the ultimate in me; it is the life of Jesus Christ in me. But it is always also life in the penultimate which waits for the ultimate. The earnestness of Christian life lies solely in the ultimate, but the penultimate, too, has its earnestness . . . Ultimate and penultimate are closely allied. What must be done, therefore, is to fortify the penultimate with a more emphatic proclamation of the ultimate, and also to protect the ultimate by taking due care for the penultimate.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps, however, Bonhoeffer was trying too hard to describe in theory something that we might better leave mostly in the realm of practice. Some evangelicals (notably African-American evangelicals) have not seemed to have had to struggle to affirm this balance as much as others (notably "mainstream" white evangelicals). The Black experience in America has forced on the African-American church a rather acute awareness of the differences between, and the need to affirm, both the ultimate and the penultimate. In Black America, the care for bodies (individual and societal) has never been separable from the "cure of souls;" concern with biblical Truth has never been separable from the truths of cultural identity and social place. Quite

<sup>11</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Ethics, edited by Eberhard Bethge (New York: Macmillan Co., 1965), pp. 134, 141, 142.

possibly, it was this African-American church model that stood behind Bonhoeffer's attempt to describe the balance between the ultimate and penultimate in the Christian life. During his formative stay at Union Seminary in New York (1930-1) he made Harlem's famous Abyssinian Baptist Church his ecclesiastical home. So, let's listen to Stephen Breck Reid describe the task of Black biblical hermeneutics as a model for all evangelical hermeneutics. It's somewhat less opaque than Bonhoeffer's:

Identity and interpretation always inform one another. The task of a black biblical hermeneutic involves the interpretation of black culture and the biblical text. Neither identity nor interpretation takes priority; they act as partners. The black biblical scholar, theologian, and preacher holds black culture and tradition in the one hand and the Bible in the other. . . a black biblical hermeneutic must interpret the black experience and the text as well. It is a two-fold task: To engage in dialogue with the text while showing how the biblical witness becomes adaptable for the fulfillment of human potential and the development of a community of life and faith in a racially hostile social, economic and political environment. . . Nonetheless, a black biblical hermeneutic must uncover the truth. Black interpretation of scripture must preach the gospel--not just the truth for the black community and not just the gospel for the black church. When we embrace the truth of the gospel, and apply it to our lives and our society, "all flesh shall see it together." For the truth, which is Truth, shall make all free.<sup>12</sup>

5. Be cautiously open to the hermeneutical future: Just before the pilgrims set sail from Holland to begin their journey back to Great Britain and then on to America, their pastor, John Robinson, addressed them on what to expect in the new world.

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<sup>12</sup>Stephen Breck Reid, Experience and Tradition: A Primer in Black Biblical Hermeneutics (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990), pp. 16, 18-9, 24.

With regard to hermeneutics he had two words. First, he told them always to remember "that the Lord has more truth and light yet to break forth out of his holy word." Second, he warned them to be on their guard against any hermeneutical novelties or inventions that would shake the foundations of the new enterprise they were launching. It seems to me that this is still good advice for evangelicals.<sup>13</sup>

With regard to Robinson's first word, it is important for evangelicals to remember that new insights can still emerge from the Bible as it is read in new and different times and places. Many evangelicals--probably the majority--have been overly cautious at this point. Rather than being hermeneutical pilgrims and explorers, most evangelicals have tended metaphorically to stay "at home" with their Bibles--snuggled up by the kitchen windows of their souls, with their favorite verses and interpretations, sipping a little biblical tea on a rainy afternoon. These evangelicals need to hear Robinson's assertion that the hermeneutically new might not only not be bad, but might be positively good.

On the other hand, there are some evangelicals (and other Christians) that seem to have an over-abundance of confidence in their own ability to discover new truths in the Bible. Many of the interpretations proposed by these (often thinly educated)

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<sup>13</sup>See James Truslow Adams, The Founding of New England (Boston, Atlantic--Little, Brown Books, 1921), p. 96 and Martin E. Marty, Pilgrims in Their Own Land: 500 Years of Religion in America (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1984), p. 61.

evangelical hermeneutical "path-breakers" have seemed rather bizarre and most have been proved unsustainable in the light of accepted biblical scholarship. This is so much the case that Mark Noll has argued that one of the main responsibilities of the evangelical biblical academy should be "to prune the lush but eccentric interpretations that thrive among evangelical Bible-believers."<sup>14</sup> (Of course, evangelicals are not alone here.

"Lush but eccentric" interpretations of the Bible flourish in many places, including at the meetings of the highly academic Society for Biblical Literature.) All of these people need to hear Robinson's warning against novelty for novelty's sake.

What seems needed here, once again, is a certain sense of modesty and balance. Evangelicals ought always to be open to the hermeneutically new, but cautiously so. They should not be running helter-skelter after every new popular or scholarly hermeneutical fad, but they ought to take seriously all proposals (whether more penultimate or more ultimate in emphasis) that promise to enlarge our understanding of the Bible, the world, ourselves, and God. We do need to respect the interpretive islands on which we and others have come to rest for the time being, but we must remember that those resting places are not permanent hermeneutical homes. Most of all, we must always talk to each other--different kinds of evangelicals with each other and evangelicals with different kinds of Christians.

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<sup>14</sup>Mark Noll, Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship, and the Bible in America (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), p. 7.

Evangelicals do not have a different pipeline to biblical truth than any one else. We are as much in the muddled hermeneutical middle of things as everyone else. Let us accept those facts and strive to be the most honest and faithful participants we can be in the great conversation of faith that is recorded in the Bible and continues on today in our discussions of that text. So, whenever someone declares, "that's scripture," we should be ready to add with Ma Joad the question, "ain't it?" And then, given this wonderfully pluralistic world of human cultures in which we live, we should be willing to listen and add to the conversation wherever it might go.